



Carolina

FORWARD

Annual Report

2023

We, the People, recognize that we have responsibilities as well as rights; that our destinies are bound together; that a freedom which only asks what's in it for me, a freedom without a commitment to others, a freedom without love or charity or duty or patriotism, is unworthy of our founding ideals, and those who died in their defense.

As citizens, we understand that America is not about what can be done for us. It's about what can be done *by* us, together — through the hard and frustrating but necessary work for self-government. That's what we believe.

President Barack Obama

2023 by the numbers...

Articles 55

Policy papers 3

Statewide polls 4

Mail pieces sent >20,000

Trolls blocked *Character limit exceeded*



Laying the foundation for North Carolina's future

North Carolina is a state in transition.

Harvard historian (and Alabama native) Imani Perry once said that to understand America, you must first understand the South. We know this to be true. Since the colonial era, through our slave society period, to the Civil War and Jim Crow, to the Civil Rights Movement and our state and region's meteoric growth over the past thirty years, what happens in the South reverberates throughout America, and changes it in turn. In few places is this more true than North Carolina.

Today, our North Carolina is still changing – fast. In so many ways, we are a microcosm of the transitions happening across the country: economically, politically, culturally and demographically. We are a diversifying and pluralizing state. New industry is taking root. Our cities and suburbs are in their third decade of booming growth. While there are growing pains, there are also the tangible benefits of living in a thriving, vital region that has its eyes set on the horizon.

Of course, not everyone sees progress as a positive. In 2023, we saw the forces of the Old South overreach once again in their determination to cling to power by any means necessary. Unable to win power through normal means, they have resorted to partisan gerrymandering, dirty tricks, and even cheating the voters in order to win. Tricks like these can work for a while – but not forever. The corrupt old guard occupying North Carolina's halls of power see the writing on the wall. They are losing ground. And it is up to us to lay the foundation for what comes next.

We founded Carolina Forward to articulate a positive, constructive, optimistic vision for the future of North Carolina – a state that is more just, democratic and prosperous, and which works for all of us, not just the well-connected few. In 2023, we not only grew by leaps and bounds, but we proved why our voice is indispensable in our state’s public policy sphere. We called out corruption, self-dealing and political double-talk in both political parties. More importantly, we made sure voters knew about it. We expanded our scope of operations and fully took our place as one of the leading center-left voices in the state. And we’re not done yet.

In our core mission to educate and inform the public about our state government, we are reaching a wider audience than ever and still growing rapidly. We experiment, leaning into what works, and discontinuing what doesn’t. We work lean. We are able to be agile and flexible, because we are structured fundamentally differently than most organizations operating in this space. Relying on small-dollar grassroots supporters, as we do, is more challenging in some ways, but also keeps us accountable and hungry. We like it that way.

The year has barely begun, and it’s already a cliché to point out that 2024 will be a pivotal year for our state and our country. At all levels of government, North Carolinians will get to choose: the future, or the past? Good government, or more corruption? A moral public policy, or one based on insider self-interest? Democracy, or fascism?

Because of you, our supporters, our state will be better prepared than ever to face this critical juncture. And with your partnership, we are ready to fight for the future with truth.

Like you, we believe in North Carolina. Thank you for investing your trust in us. Now let’s go.

Always forward,



Blair Reeves
Executive Director

In 2023:

- Over 200 sustaining supporters
- 400% search impression growth
- >80,000 unique website visitors (with no paid promotion)
- *Organically-driven growth*

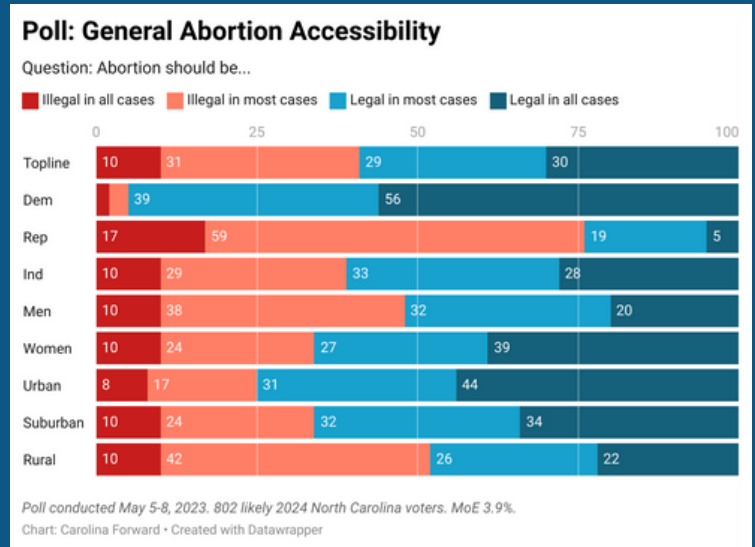


POLLING

This year, we commissioned four major statewide polls. These were quoted in local, state and national media – for example, our polling during the legislature’s deliberation of a draconian (and deeply unpopular) abortion ban.

Both the quality and presentation of our polling research has made Carolina Forward into a go-to resource for information on voter attitudes. We have become a hub for research and insight on voter sentiment for groups and organizations across the state.

We view North Carolina as generally an under-pollled state, with a dearth of credible, independent polling research. We are filling that niche. By doing so, we can provide both allies and the public at large a fuller, more accurate view of voter attitudes than is often portrayed. North Carolina is a fundamentally politically moderate state whose people – like most Americans – are open to new ideas about how we tackle social, economic and political issues.



NEW AUDIENCES

In 2023, we leaned into Instagram and TikTok - with great results.

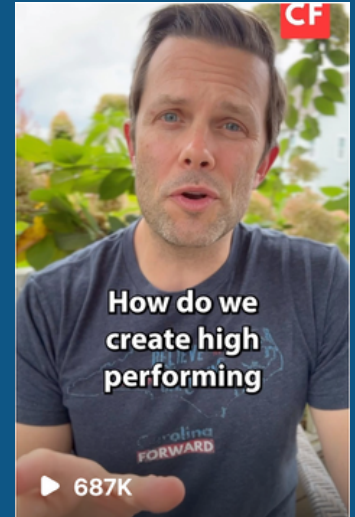
Short-form video has produced an order of magnitude or more greater audience reach than any other communication format.

Between just the Instagram and TikTok platforms, Carolina Forward now reaches an average audience of 700,000 unique *users* (not views!) every month - the large majority in North Carolina. Some months are over 1 million. We have paid \$0 for promotion.

We view social media reach, and video specifically, as an asymmetric advantage we possess compared to our opponents. Our "growth audiences" are reachable on these platforms - theirs are not. Moreover, while it is possible (albeit very difficult) to convert money into organic reach on these platforms, it is impossible to buy trust. And trust is our fundamental currency.

Short-form video is not a perfect communications medium. Nuance and subtlety is very difficult. Audience attention spans are very short. There are many things you simply cannot explain in 35 seconds (average watching time for many videos). But if we're able to work within these constraints, the impact is worth it.

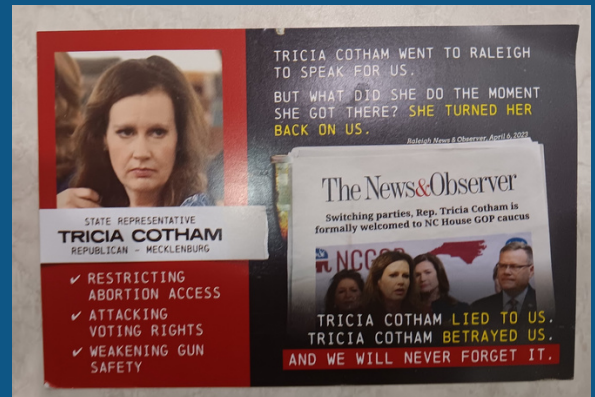
The way we earn trust is by telling the truth, treating our audience like adults, and communicating clearly. And it's working.



ACCOUNTABILITY

Not only was 2023 a “long session” year of the General Assembly, but it was also one in which a Republican majority – won not through elections, but with one politician’s corrupt dealing – rammed through an outrageous, extreme agenda. Accordingly, we invested heavily in accountability work.

When Tricia Cotham revealed her corrupt trick and switched parties, we acted quickly to send 10,000 pieces of mail to unaffiliated voters across East Mecklenburg making sure they knew what Cotham and the Mecklenburg GOP had done to them. As they say in Mecklenburg: **“You just can’t trust a Cotham.”**



In Concord and Wilmington, we set up billboards making sure voters know what their representatives are doing in Raleigh. Both have received rave reviews in both areas.

DEFEND OUR SCHOOLS

In response to the massive (and massively unpopular) private school voucher expansion in this year's legislature, Carolina Forward commissioned a new video issue spot: "Defend Our Schools." It was broadcast on digital channels statewide, and received nearly a quarter of a million thru-plays. We intend to use it again in 2024.



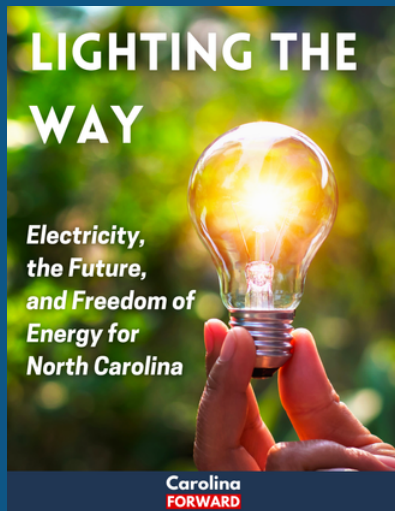
"Defend Our Schools"

(click to view the ad)

RESEARCH

At our core, we are a movement of ideas. It is not enough to point out the flaws of the plans, arguments and philosophy of the Right; we must also advance and articulate alternatives. Since the beginning, Carolina Forward has invested significant time and energy in showing that another way is possible.

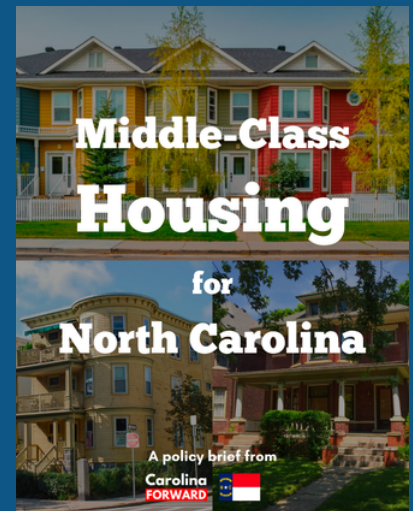
This year, we released three full policy papers to paint a picture of what a better North Carolina could look like.



“Lighting the Way” focuses on energy policy and alternatives to the monopoly utility model.



“Voices From the Break Room” is a deep-dive study of NC’s working-class voters.



“The Middle-Class Housing Plan” is a policy brief outlining how NC’s leaders can increase the housing supply.

RESOURCES

Carolina Forward remains completely reliant on our grassroots supporters. We have no institutional donors or grants. To raise the resources we need to be effective, we pursue our mission in public, and ask for assistance to continue. We are pleased to report that this model is working.

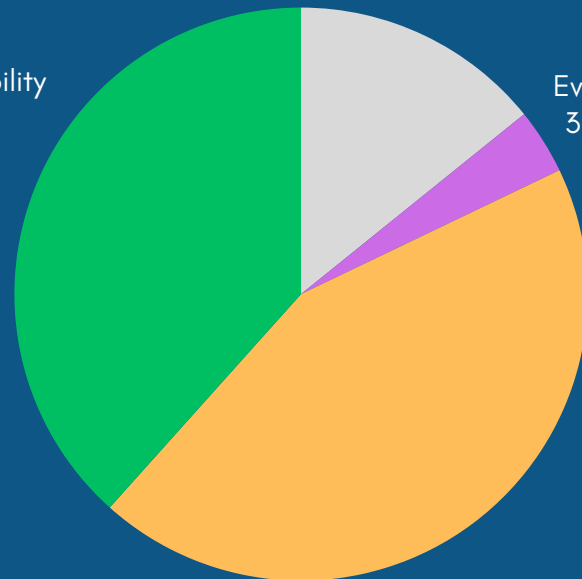
Our operational revenue continues to climb year-on-year, driven primarily by two things: (1) our sustaining donor program, which continues to grow and provides us with the ability to plan; and (2) the Carolina Forward Foundation, our fully tax-deductible 501c(3) arm.

- **Average contribution: \$35**
- **89% of donors from North Carolina**

Communications and accountability
38.4%

General administrative & legal
14.2%

Events
3.7%



To this day, Carolina Forward has no full-time staff, and is run by a team of dedicated volunteers. This grants us the flexibility to invest nearly all of our donors' money directly in programming.

Thought leadership and research
43.7%

THE PLAN FOR 2024

1

Thought leadership and accountability

This year will feature statewide mail, billboard and ad campaigns highlighting critical issues facing North Carolina.

2

Plant our flag in Raleigh

We are the people's lobbyist in Raleigh - literally. This year's legislative session will see Carolina Forward's first full-time lobbyist at the Legislature.

3

Research and analysis

We will continue our leading analysis on state issues, the Carolina Forward Poll, and more in this year's election cycle.

4

The Slate - and more

The Carolina Forward Slate will return for the third consecutive election cycle, and we are also engaging in select primaries.

THE TEAM



**Nicole
Quick**



**Ryan
Watts**



**(Representative- elect)
Jordan Lopez**



**Carla
Catalan Day**



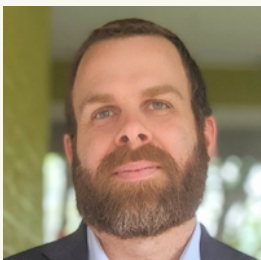
**Justin
King**



**Blair
Reeves**



**Grayson
Barnette**




**Dr. Rob
Taber**



**Chris
Suggs**



**Terri
LeGrand**



Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Robert F. Kennedy

Help power progress in North Carolina.

Contribute directly on ActBlue:

ActBlue

Contributions to the Carolina
Forward Foundation can be sent to:

Carolina Forward Foundation

P.O. Box 452

Carrboro, NC 27510

For major gifts, contact

hello@carolinaforward.org

Carolina **FORWARD**

Carolina Forward is a think tank and policy organization dedicated to building a more just, democratic and prosperous North Carolina.



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